

## Cuban Ransom

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# Well-Paid, Castro Frees Prisoners; Our Government's Role in the Deal

A more unlikely Santa Claus could scarcely be imagined. But there he was—dark-bearded, Fidel Castro—waiting at Havana Harbor for the arrival of the ransom ship African Pilot.

Castro seemed almost overcome by Christmastime cheer as he watched over the exchange of 1,113 captured Bay of Pigs invaders for the first instalment of \$53,000,000 in drugs, medicine, food, and surgical and medical equipment from the United States. The Cuban premier joshed with the captain of the African Pilot and took four Americans from the ship on a tour of a new housing development and of the home of the late author Ernest Hemingway.

He graciously declared a 24-hour "state of peace" with the United States and, as a "Christmas bonus" to the ransom deal, allowed more than 900 relatives of the Cuban invasion prisoners to go to the United States. Castro also pledged the early release of 21 Americans held in his prisons. There was even talk in Havana about a general amnesty for the 80,000 political prisoners behind bars on Castro's island. And Cuban authorities said an additional 2,500 relatives of the invaders would be permitted to go to the United States.

Castro's dockside gestures were somewhat less than magnanimous, however. Two days after the prisoners' relatives departed, he canceled plans to let any more relatives follow them.

### Possessions Stay Behind

Nor did the Cuban premier make departure easy for those who did get away. Except for the clothes they wore, the relatives were forced to leave behind practically all their possessions. Cuban militiamen snatched toys from youngsters before they boarded the African Pilot. One man had to surrender a jeweled ring he hadn't removed from his finger in 20 years. The militiamen told him, "Either you take the ring off, we cut the finger off, or you don't go."

The prisoner exchange deal had been in the works for several months. A previous attempt to swap tractors for the prisoners fell through. Last summer Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy asked James B. Donovan, a New York lawyer who handled the transfer of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Russian spy town was Homer F. Berry, a sandy-haired, down on Little Rock. The happiest man in Christmas Eve snow in 38 years drifted downtown and suburban stores, the first As shoppers pushed their way through

grinned, and wouldn't talk about it. Irritated. The Weather Bureau was chagrined. Youngsters were ecstatic. Parents were

newspaper at \$4,000,000, to the families of the prisoners.

President Kennedy felt a moral obligation to obtain the release of the Cuban prisoners. He called the Bay of Pigs fiasco his responsibility, and named his brother, the Attorney General, to handle the Administration's end of the prisoner exchange.

The propriety of the Government's deep involvement in the ransom deal evoked some criticism. Republican Sen. Thruston B. Morton of Kentucky chided the Administration for calling the deal a private venture. Senator Morton said Attorney General Robert Kennedy had contacted "a company with an antitrust suit pending against it" and suggested it contribute to the ransom fund.

There was also some grumbling among the more than 100 companies that donated either goods or transportation services to the prisoner exchange. One businessman called the deal "black-mail" and refused to contribute. Others murmured about Government pressure. Most, however, participated without complaint. The Justice Department denied that "pressure was put on any company by anyone in Government."

### The Government's Role

Mr. Donovan denies that the Kennedy Administration masterminded the prisoner deal. But the Government's role was apparent all along, and the deal couldn't have taken place without full support of the Government.

Much of the last-minute maneuvering went on right at the Justice Department in Washington. Robert Kennedy assigned deputy Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach and other aides to assist Mr. Donovan. The Attorney General himself met in his office with groups of businessmen. Other Government departments helped out, too.

When some companies worried about tax problems involved in donating goods to the ransom stockpile, the Internal Revenue Service eased their minds by declaring that any donations could be written off as charitable contributions. The Justice Department told the corporations involved that antitrust laws wouldn't be enforced against them in connection with the prisoner deal.

The Administration's assistance was more obvious at times. Some of the cargo loaded aboard the African Pilot was plainly marked "U.S. Government Property." When the Red Cross needed volunteers to handle the tons of cargo, a group of Miami dock. The government even contributed funds, estimated by one Miami